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STRENGTHENING OF THE COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN AND DISASTER RELIEF ASSISTANCE OF THE UNITED NATIONS, INCLUDING SPECIAL ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE
REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES: QUESTIONS RELATING TO REFUGEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS AND HUMANITARIAN QUESTIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS QUESTIONS

SECURITY COUNCIL
Fifty-third year

Letter dated 20 October 1998 from the Permanent Representative of Ethiopia to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

In addition to its flagrant and unprovoked aggression against Ethiopia, the Government of Eritrea is still continuing its massive and gross violation of the human rights of Ethiopians residing in Eritrea and those remaining in the occupied territories.

As clear evidence and testimony of the behaviour and acts of the Government of Eritrea, I have the honour to transmit to you a study and an analysis by M. Wray Witten, JD, MPA (Princeton University) under the title "The grave danger of illusions about Eritrea", concerning Eritrean aggression against Ethiopia as well as the violations of the human rights of Ethiopian nationals by Eritrea.

I also would like to inform you that the number of Ethiopians deported from Eritrea has now reached 27,866 and, in fact, is increasing day by day.

I should be grateful if you would kindly circulate the present letter and its annex as a document of the fifty-third session of the General Assembly, under agenda items 20, 105 and 110, and of the Security Council.

(Signed) Duri MOHAMMED
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

Annex

THE GRAVE DANGER OF ILLUSIONS ABOUT ERITREA

by M. Wray Witten, JD MPA

August, 1998

INTRODUCTION Since returning in June to my home in **Mekelle,** Tigray, Ethiopia, from teaching at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at **Princeton University,** I have been trying to understand the international community's perception of Eritrea's military invasion of Ethiopia. It is frankly amazing to me that Eritrea has not been strongly condemned, economically sanctioned, or otherwise pressured to withdraw its soldiers and settle peacefully whatever disputes may lie at the root of the invasion. But our hopes for Eritrea, and Eritrea's derivative ability to shade our analyses, have kept that from happening. Because we are still enthralled by the illusion of Eritrea, rather than repulsed by the emerging reality, the international community has actually played a role in bringing the coming war.

The gist of my understanding is as follows. Since 1991, we have interpreted the early ambiguous signs of Eritrean leadership in the most optimistic light, longing for a good outcome against all historical odds for such a revolutionary regime in this century. Now Eritrea has invaded and continues to militarily occupy areas of Ethiopia that I personally know Ethiopia has peacefully administered since 1992. Eritrea has shamelessly lied about this military action, and many people have accepted Eritrea's false statements that Ethiopia is the bad actor. But this invasion and this outright lying are new information, allowing us, indeed, forcing us to reassess our earlier optimism. Seeing Eritrea more clearly as a state embarked on outlaw behavior, charming as its public relations people may be, must cause us to realize that the situation the Ethiopian government faces is not as we thought.

Based on this new realization, we must conclude that the international community has failed in its role, failed to impress upon Eritrea that it must conform to international norms and withdraw its forces from the areas it invaded. As a result, a war in which tens of thousands are likely to die is upon us. When these people die their blood will be on our hands if we do not press the international community to take strong steps to force Eritrea to give up its military approach.

Thus, the purpose of my writing the following is to warn of the very real danger, the tens of thousands of deaths that will result and will be on our hands if we continue to accept a facile illusion of Eritrea. In doing so, I have no animosity towards the Eritrean people, only admiration and hope like most observers, hope for a constructive resolution, hope for the peaceful environment in the Horn of Africa that economic development requires.

NEW INFORMATION I had hoped that journalists would clearly present the facts of Eritrea's brutal invasion of Ethiopia, for I have no desire to become the target of Eritrea's ire as others who have crossed Eritrea have recently found themselves. But the journalists have not done so in a way that clearly reveals the path chosen by Eritrea's leader. It is true that I have an information advantage, having worked and lived for the last seven years in **Tigray,** the northern most Ethiopian State, sharing its long border with Eritrea, and having traveled in Eritrea extensively many times during the same period. But all of the following information is readily and publicly available information, hidden only by our hopes.

No one knows where the final border between Ethiopia and Eritrea will be located. But there is a great deal of information about the occupied areas prior to Eritrea's invasion and about what Eritrea has done. To begin with, there are two large areas administered for the last seven years by Ethiopia now occupied by force by heavily armed Eritrean soldiers. The first area is south and east of the **Badime River** in the Western Zone. I refer to it as **Badime**. The second area is the home of the primarily Catholic highland **Erob** people in the Eastern Zone,

which I refer to as Erob though the occupied area stretches west to **Zalanbessa**, the principle highland border crossing.

Badime is an extremely remote area, something like 400 square kilometers of "black cotton soil" without all-weather roads. Apparently the first infrastructure constructed in the area after the end of the Ethiopian civil war in 1991, was a set of village water supply wells fitted with hand-pumps. In June of 1992, I visited the first dozen completed wells. **UNICEF** funded the construction based on a proposal I helped write while working as a natural resources lawyer in the western United States. (I retired from the practice of law later in 1992.) The drilling was managed initially by the Ethiopian Water Works Construction Authority, monitored by the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) and an American PVO called the Water and Sanitation Consultancy Group (WSCG) of Denver, Colorado, of which I was then a member.

One of the new wells we visited was in a village of about 5,000 called **Adi Tsetser**, which I will use as an example. Eritrean soldiers now occupy Adi Tsetser by force, along with many other villages in the area we visited. When we visited it in 1992 it was clearly administered by the Tigray Regional (now State) and Ethiopian National (now Federal) governments, with which we worked closely, and the following evidence indicates that it has been ever since.

After 1992 other infrastructure improvements were built in Adi Tsetser, and in the other villages throughout the area now occupied. In 1995 and 1996 the community and the Tigray Bureau of Education collaborated to build an elementary school (initially only grades 1 and 2) staffed by teachers provided by the Bureau. In 1996 the Tigray Development Association (TDA), an Ethiopian NGO with which I have worked for many years, built a Health Center operated by the Tigray Bureau of Health. In 1997 the community of Adi Tsetser enrolled its primary school, one of five communities in the now occupied area to do so, in an extremely successful TDA program, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), called the BESO program. The BESO program enlists

the community's support for improving their children's primary education by competitively awarding small grants and has enlisted a many-fold outpouring of community matching contributions. Finally, even at the time Eritrea invaded, **Karen Hanna Witten, MD MSPH,** to whom I am married, was working with nearby communities (around **Adi Da'iro**, which was not occupied) on a malaria control bednet program, a supplement to the long-standing malaria control program in the Badime area required by the extensive construction of small-scale irrigation dams in the area.

Throughout these years in Adi Tsetser and in the rest of the now occupied Badime area, Community Health Workers treated patients at the village level and filed reports every month; local judges decided cases that were appealed to district and state courts; local, state and federal representatives were elected. And very much the same can be said for the other villages in the Badime area. **No Eritrean national, state or local government was present.**

Erob area is much smaller on a map than Badime, but its steep slate mountainsides, which have only recently admitted vehicles, make it historically as remote as Badime and it might be as large in area if pressed flat. It lies east of the main border crossing at Zalanbessa, a border I have crossed many times during the seven years of peace. Until the beginning of May, 1998, the Eritrean border guards and their slowly improving buildings were always north of the town of Zalanbessa. **In May Eritrean soldiers took the town of Zalanbessa by force and told gullible journalists that Ethiopian soldiers had put up the long-standing border signs only recently.** At the same time they invaded and occupied the Erob lands to the east and tried to push south to the large town of **Adigrat**.

I first visited the Erob area in the winter of 1993-1994, and explored all the area now occupied with various hydro-geologists and engineers in 1994, 1995 and 1996, investigating indigenous soil and water conservation technologies. I walked for days each time through all but one of the villages now occupied by force by Eritrean soldiers. My

guides were local farmers organized by the **Catholic priest Father Hagos** who heads the **Adigrat Diocese Development Action (ADDA),** and ADDA's rural engineers who at that time worked with the farmers on both sides of the border, in Ethiopia and Eritrea. **The location of the border was well known to all because land allocations and use were governed by it.**

Throughout the area primary schools were enrolled in the TDA BESO project, Community Health Workers treated ill villagers and filed reports, and civil society generally proceeded as in Badime. **There were no Eritrean local, state or national governments present.**

In all, dozens of villages in Badime and Erob are now occupied by force by Eritrean soldiers. Some clinics and schools, such as those in the village of Badime, the Eritrean soldiers have wantonly destroyed, evidently actually believing they could expunge the hard evidence of Ethiopian governance and development. Local officials, elected in one of six elections that have taken place in the area under the Ethiopian Federal and Tigray State governments, have been publicly executed. The villagers--women and children and men (except those who have stayed to fight)--have been driven out of the areas at gunpoint.

Barely subsistence farmers to begin with, these poor people--poor beyond any possible appreciation in the West--left their meager crops in the fields, their simple churches to be looted, their basic houses to be torn apart for firewood, their one change of clothes, and walked out of the area carrying on their backs all they own, into a nightmare officially called "displaced."

The new information about Eritrea includes these brutal acts. But it also includes the information about what the Eritreans told the world about their attacks. Eritrea first claimed Ethiopia had invaded Eritrea; then, admitting it had been the aggressor, Eritrea claimed it was only taking back areas taken by Ethiopia by force six months before. These are both bald lies. Today Eritrea says its invasion is irrelevant and we should forget about it.

That is not the end of the new information about Eritrea, however. But it is instructive to review other new information in a comparative way.

CHOICES Exactly because so many revolutionary regimes in this century have succumbed to ideology and demagoguery and failed, it is instructive to compare the choices of the leaders of Eritrea and Ethiopia relevant to Eritrea's invasion:

Youth Training: Eritrea has a mandatory, centrally controlled military training program for all young men and women, effectively creating a militarized force throughout society answering to a small central group. It is these trainees who are most often described by those fleeing Eritrea as the people who inflict random violence. By comparison, Ethiopia has a voluntary, incentive driven youth training program, at the state level, training those young men and women who choose to join it in construction skills (a course I helped design, initially, as a TDA training program) and home health educators. Even now, in the face of war, the Ethiopian army seems able to re-staff its earlier demobilized army with paid volunteers.

Military Solutions: In the past couple of years, Eritrea has attacked all its neighbors, Yemen, Djibouti, Sudan, and now Ethiopia despite the fact that a joint Eritrean-Ethiopian Commission was actually meeting to discuss border issues at the time of the invasion. In the same period, Ethiopia has gained an international reputation for facilitating peaceful negotiations in the region.

Information: Eritrea, skilled at public relations, has baldly lied to the world about its invasion of Ethiopia. Ethiopia, often legitimately criticized for not explaining itself and not taking journalists seriously, immediately told the world it was under attack. Eritrea's president publicly criticized Ethiopia for doing so.

Escalation: Eritrea first attacked the Badime area during the period from May 6 to May 18. Not satisfied, Eritrea attacked the main border crossing at Zalanbessa and the Erob area to the east, trying to push south to Adigrat between May 31 and June 6. Still not satisfied, on June 5 Eritrea bombed the town of Mekelle where I live with cluster bombs, hitting the commercial airport once and twice hitting an area on the west side of Mekelle containing only houses, a large hospital under construction, a public housing facility where many of the State's mid-level managers live, and several schools. They hit the primary school and returned later the same day to bomb again, hitting the people gathered to attend to the dead and wounded. Still not satisfied, on June 9 the Eritreans launched another attack through Zalanbessa, on June 10 another through Badime, and on June 11 attempted to sever the road link between Ethiopia and the port at Djibouti far to the east with a third attack. Still not satisfied, on June 11 Eritrea bombed the town of Adigrat, killing civilians and hitting a food storehouse used by the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission to feed those forced from their homes by Eritrean forces. Eritrea claimed to have targeted a new pharmaceutical factory, a symbol of Ethiopian economic development, for military reasons. By comparison, Ethiopian militia and, eventually, regular army forces merely held their positions and repulsed later attacks but did not attempt to reclaim areas already occupied by force by Eritrea in Badime and Erob. On June 5 and 6 Ethiopia bombed the airforce base outside Asmara, a strictly military target.

Peace Process: Eritrea has rejected every effort at a peaceful settlement, except its own which is not supported by anyone but Eritrea. Ethiopia has accepted the settlement process proposed by the USA and Rwanda, the OAU, and the United Nations. The key difference is that Eritrea refuses to withdraw its troops from the areas it occupied by force in May and June, areas it falsely claims to have administered since the 1991. All the suffering and much of the ill will could have been stopped had Eritrea simply withdrawn its troops to pre-May 6 positions.

Many have speculated that Eritrea's escalation of the war and its intransigence towards resolution indicates that Eritrea is motivated by deeper issues than the border dispute, e.g., a desire to extract a more favorable economic relationship with its faster developing neighbor. If this is the case, it seems to me that the information we must appreciate in order to overcome our illusions about Eritrea is that Eritrea's idea of negotiating tactics is abhorrent.

Human Rights: Finally, apparently in an effort to divert attention from its aggression and the bald lies which have revealed it's new character to the world, Eritrea has attempted to shift the focus from its military attacks on the people of Ethiopia to human rights abuses of Eritreans in Ethiopia. This is by far the most difficult area to compare, and the most inflammatory. Frankly, I find the tangle of conventions on human rights, prisoners of war and other relevant conventions to be almost impenetrable, even though I sat for many years on American Civil Liberties Union panels that decide what cases it should take to protect American's civil rights. And, frankly, it seems to me extremely unlikely that either country has managed to avoid every ill treatment of the other's citizens, for there are heart-rending stories on all sides. Eventually, we may get better information (though not until the observers actually begin inspecting with something like objective skepticism on both sides) and we may then have some evidence of the statistics and characteristics of the incidents. At this time, it is only possible for me to compare the approach of the two countries, as reported by those fleeing from each country and by the two countries themselves.

Eritrea blithely claims to have taken no action at all against Ethiopians in Eritrea. But Ethiopians now fleeing Eritrea repeat the same horrors of systematic searches in the night, beating and torture, rape, burning, and murder. Observers have only been allowed in after the fact and only allowed to talk to people selected by the government. By comparison, Ethiopia publicly announced that it was taking action against certain groups of Eritreans living in Ethiopia, primarily for

security reasons after blunt Eritrean threats of attacks from within, and carried out the actions as announced, subject to oversight by already present international agencies.

Eritreans arriving in Eritrea seem to be complaining mostly of loss of property (which the Ethiopian government says it is protecting in accordance with international conventions), separation of families, and hardship, though certainly there have been some unfortunate cases. In reviewing the statements on both sides, I find I constantly must remind myself of the extreme poverty of both these countries, and to consider whether the conditions complained of are actually worse than the conditions most people, particularly the vast rural majority, suffer regularly in their lives.

However, whatever the merits of the competing claims of human rights abuses turn out to be, the key point to be remembered at all times is that any abuses there are start with the brutality of the Eritrean invasion, and continue solely because Eritrea refuses to withdraw from the areas it has occupied by force. Had Eritrea not invaded, had it withdrawn, if only it would withdraw, there would be no human rights issues.

ERITREA'S VIEW OF US One of the most interesting but appalling aspects of the new view of Eritrea provided by recent events is the revelation of what Eritrea thinks of the rest of us, what its leaders think we will accept in the way of Eritrean behavior. For example, to the UN Human Rights Commission, on 6 August 1998, in Geneva, Switzerland, the Eritrean representative stated the following as part of a prepared statement:

"I wish I could give a rational explanation for the actions of the Ethiopian Government over the last three months. Just ninety days ago, the mass expulsion of Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin was literally unthinkable. We pray that there is no more madness to come from those responsible for the protection of Ethiopian citizens and residents of whatever origin. Eritrea has nothing to seek except the promotion of the

lasting interests of the peoples of the two countries and the development of personal and cultural, socio-economic and political relations between them which will foster the profit and advantage of both and which shall not interfere with the peace and rights of either."

This is an incredibly disingenuous statement when placed in the context of the Eritrean invasion. It might be summarized as, We can't imagine why the Ethiopians are acting this way, when all we have done is invade them and launch organized disruption of Ethiopian society from within Ethiopia.

I must admit that I find Eritrea's disdainful attitude of manipulative superiority towards the world community to be one of the strongest indications of changes within the Eritrean leadership. What must they think of our perceptive abilities?

Imagine if Mexico occupied Texas and went to the UN to protest in these words the American retaliation (imagine the retaliation!) They would be laughed out of the hall for their sheer temerity. But we long so for Eritrea to beat the odds of demagoguery to which so many other such regimes have fallen that we have actually listened to them politely. Is it any wonder Eritrea has come to think we are a bunch of fools, as they obviously do?

PAST OBSERVATIONS RECONSIDERED In light of this new information about Eritrea, it is worth reconsidering our past observations to try to understand what was accurate and what was manipulated illusion. Journalists, political scientists and other government advisors have often drawn two conclusions about Eritrea in the past few years. After visiting both Ethiopia and Eritrea they would conclude that Eritrea was "governing better" than Ethiopia because in Eritrea there were no journalists in jail and no opposition parties complaining about the difficulties of political life, while in Ethiopia both were present in significant numbers. These conclusions were based on a line of reasoning that in Eritrea all the citizens were united in positive collective action, not just united against their historical oppressors. These were, of course, the conclusions the Eritreans accompanying these visitors sought to generate.

But these conclusions omitted consideration of valuable information, to the credit of the Eritrean's public relations capabilities.

The omitted information is important: In Ethiopia there are journalists in prison, but there is also as hearty a private opposition press written by the many Ethiopian journalists who are not in prison as anywhere in Africa. In Ethiopia, though there are still few members elected to parliaments from opposition parties, there are in fact numerous opposition political parties speaking out. In Eritrea opposition press and parties were prohibited.

[It is not my aim here to paint a heroic picture of Ethiopia. Ethiopia has many problems. But by comparison to almost any revolutionary government of this century, certainly to the now revealed Eritrea, Ethiopia's current government has made a surprising number of choices now thought to be good. Slowly bad decisions, such as over regulation of foreign investors, are giving way. But there are still lots of problems, particularly in areas of Ethiopia where democracy has not yet worked to make state and local government effective.)

One more piece of information is useful at this juncture: One of the correlations political scientists have been finding in recent years is the significantly lower likelihood of a democratic government attacking its neighbors than of a non-democratic government doing so. This turns out to be a pretty strong correlation, though depending somewhat on how you define democratic and other variables.

When we look at all the pieces of information about Eritrea we have today, might we now at least ask ourselves seriously whether Eritrea still deserves the image it once had, the treatment it once received? That the EPLF's leadership has always been concentrated in a small, unchanging group is well documented; nevertheless there seems little point in now wondering if we were wrong about Eritrea from the start. But has Eritrea changed?

- When Eritrea forced its youth into military training instead of development;

- When Eritrea built up the numbers of its trained military instead of demobilizing them;

- When Eritrean land use decision-making shifted from local governments to soldiers;

- When Eritrea failed to attract investors and actually lost many Eritrean investors to Ethiopia due to its insistence on the government being a partner in business (a prime reason, I am told by my Eritrean neighbors still living peacefully in Mekelle, as are the vast majority of Eritreans in Ethiopia, why there are so many Eritrean business people in Ethiopia);

- When Eritrea invaded its neighbors;

Shouldn't we wonder if these are the signs of yet another revolutionary government failing?

Shouldn't we ask ourselves if the image we had of Eritrea, of a high degree of voluntary collective action towards development (instead of just against a prior enemy), was real or an illusion?

Shouldn't we have asked ourselves, and shouldn't we ask ourselves now, if these are illusions, then what else is an illusion?

I think it is necessary to ask now, necessary to reconsider just what kind of government Eritrea is today. To understand the situation faced by the Ethiopians, to understand just how much Ethiopia needs the strong support of the international community today, we must understand what is across the trenches. For trenches there now are, on both sides, heavily fortified with hundreds of thousands of soldiers, tanks and howitzers, and landmines.

The evidence seems to clearly indicate that Eritrea has gone down an old path, the same one so many other failed revolutionary governments have gone down. Its own policies having failed to advance the causes its citizens seek to

advance, it has returned to rallying the troops to hide the internal shortcomings repressive governance so often seems to engender.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF ILLUSIONS What will be the consequences of our failure to reassess the Eritrean government, to see it as it is, to treat it as it deserves to be treated? The grave danger to Ethiopia, and to the Horn of Africa region, of Eritrea's outlaw behavior going unchecked is clear. If Eritrea is not severely enough pressured, and more, coerced into withdrawing its occupying forces, Ethiopia will have no choice but to push them out. Ethiopia can not justify allowing its citizens in the occupied areas to suffer at Eritrea's whim. (Again, imagine Texans under the boot of occupying Mexican soldiers.) Ethiopia has a duty to protect its citizens from such a fate. Ethiopia has shown remarkable restraint until now in seeking peaceful, non-military solutions. It has repeatedly sought the help of the international community to reach peaceful resolutions. But so far the international community has only rebuked Eritrea in the mildest tones. There has been no condemnation, no economic embargo, no threat brought against Eritrea. Instead, some have even glorified the Eritrean David fighting the Ethiopian Goliath, simple-mindedly mistaking this as a rerun of the Soviet-backed Ethiopia oppressing Eritrea, forgetting that it was the current Ethiopian government that, at great political cost to itself, supported the independence of Eritrea. And forgetting that it is Eritrea that has invaded all its neighbors.

I believe that when, not if, Ethiopia is soon forced to push Eritrea out of the occupied lands, the blood of the tens of thousands who will die will be on the hands of the international community, as it so often has been in this century, for taking inadequate action. I urge the international community to take the strongest possible action against Eritrea to prevent this. Eritrea must be seen as the bad actor it is in this situation and treated as such.

In particular, if the United States and the United Nations are sincere about peace and economic development in Africa, they must back up those sentiments with actions strong enough to wake Eritrea from its grand illusion.